LBJ, Nixon backed Operation Chaos

WASHINGTON (AP) — Presidents Johnson and Nixon pressured the CIA into mounting a domestic spy operation which director Richard Helms knew violated the agency's charter, according to a Senate intelligence committee staff report.

Operation Chaos, designed to uncover the foreign influence behind domestic unrest, lasted from 1967 to 1974 despite repeated findings that student and racial demonstrations at home were not directed or financed from abroad, the report added.

The staff report called Chaos' gathering of information on domestic political activity "a step toward the dangers of a domestic secret police."

At its peak, Operation Chaos carried the names of 300,000 Americans in a computerized index code-named Hydra and maintained separate files on an estimated 7,500 citizens, according to the report released Tuesday.

Information in the files included intelligence on domestic political activity gathered from electronic eavesdropping, mail opening, undercover agents and FBI reports, the staff study said.

As an example of the scope of Chaos, the report cited the CIA's request to the National Security Agency for material picked up from international phone calls and telegrams "regardless of how innocuous the information may appear."

"Operation Chaos was not an intelligence mission sought by the CIA," the report stressed. Presidents Johnson and Nixon pressed then-director Helms to determine the extent of hostile foreign influence on domestic unrest, and the agency's repeated negative findings only led to pressure for a more thorough investigation, according to the report.

In February, 1969, Helms sent a written warning "to Henry Kissinger for President Nixon" that "this is an area not within the charter of this agency, so I need not emphasize how extremely sensitive this makes the (report on student unrest). Should anyone learn of its existence, it would prove most embarrassing for all concerned."

The report also provided descriptions of three related projects — Merrimack, Resistance and Project 2.

Under Merrimack, the CIA used construction workers and tradesmen in Washington as part-time agents to collect "any information about the plans and attitudes" of such groups as the Women's Strike for Peace, the Washington Peace Center, the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Resistance "compiled information about radical groups around the country, particularly on campuses," according to the report.